

HAIKUS FOR JEWS

David M. Bader



Haikus FOR Jews

For You, A Little Wisdom

David M. Bader

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There is no subject Whatever that is not fit for haiku.

—BASHO

This you call poetry?

—YIDDISH PROVERB

Acknowledgments

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Foreword

Of all the many forms of Jewish-Japanese poetry, the Jewish haiku is perhaps the most sublimely beautiful. Consisting of just seventeen syllables, this little-known style of verse combines the simplicity and elegance of Asian art with the irritability and impatience of Jewish kvetching. Its brief, carefully wrought lines are designed to produce in the reader a “haiku moment”—a sudden, intense realization, such as “So that’s it?”

The modern haiku owes its origins to fifteenth-century Japan, where it was first noticed that a seventeen-syllable poem was over much sooner than other poems. After the failure of experiments with eighteen- and nineteen-syllable alternatives (“too bloated”), the haiku was embraced by Zen masters and Samurai warrior monks, who were extremely pressed for time. In keeping with the era’s rigid code of Bushido, haiku poets who exceeded the seventeen-syllable limit were given the choice of committing harakiri—ritual suicide—or apologizing for being so long-winded.

The earliest Jewish haikus were the contribution of the now almost-forgotten Jewish Haiku Mavens. Like the Japanese haiku, the Jewish haiku was typically an untitled work, consisting of three lines of five, seven, and five syllables, respectively. It also had to include a *kigo*, or “season word,” hinting at the time of year. For example, in traditional Japanese haiku, *russet* could suggest autumn, *dragonfly* could mean summer, while *cherry blossom* might connote spring. Similarly, in Jewish haiku, *sunblock* could signify summer, *extra sweater* winter, and *doing my taxes* spring. In Jewish haiku, the season word was sometimes left out entirely and replaced by a “home-furnishings word,” such as *broadloom*.

Perhaps the most brilliant poet of the Jewish haiku was Sheldon “Sashimi” Lepstein, according to his mother. Lepstein grew up aspiring to be a retainer in the court of the Tokugawa Shogunate. Since he was born on the Upper West Side of Manhattan in 1948, he enrolled in City College

instead. There, influenced by such haiku poets as Basho, Issa, and Shiki, he soon found himself drawn to the works of Melvin Weintraub (“*Floop, flop!* The sound of / matzoh balls plunging into / boiling chicken broth”) and Irving Gittelman (“Pans empty, plates cleared, / yet another pot roast is / now indigestion”).

Lepstein eventually mastered the intricacies of the Jewish haiku himself. Some of his finest efforts, the product of bitter life experience, were even more pointed and concise than traditional haiku, such as his searing one-syllable poem, “Oy!” and his two-syllable epic, “Gevalt!” He is perhaps best remembered today for the melancholy haiku

No fins, no flippers,
the gefilte fish swims with
some difficulty.

Though adhering to the traditional format, the haikus in this volume have been made more accessible to meet the needs of Jewish people who may be in a hurry. All syllables have been counted and re-counted by the accounting firm of PricewaterhouseCoopers. The author takes full responsibility for any errors that may have crept in, possibly as a result of proofreading after a heavy meal and feeling a little sleepy.

Haikus FOR Jews



Five thousand years a
wandering people—then we
found the cabanas.

Hey! Get back indoors!
Whatever you were doing
could put an eye out.



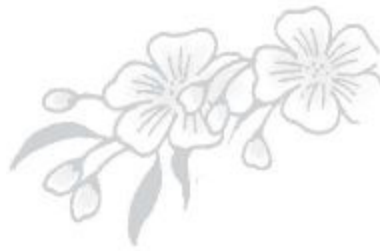
In the ice sculpture
reflected bar-mitzvah guests
nosh on chopped liver.

How soft the petals
of the floral arrangement
I have just stolen.



Shocking new finding—
all this worrying really
will give you cancer.

Catskills hotel sign—
PRESIDENT JOHNSON SLEPT HERE
Haven't changed a thing.



Add cholesterol,
overcook, then serve with bread—
recipe revealed.

Beyond Valium,[®]
the peace of knowing one's child
is an internist.





Firefly steals into
the night just like my former
partner, that gonif.

The same kimono
the top geishas are wearing—
got it at Loehmann's.



In a stage whisper
a yenta confides the name

of her friend's disease.

New, at Oys "R" Us!
Hypochondriac Barbie
has a gout attack.



Jewish triathlon—
gin rummy, then contract bridge,
followed by a nap.

Looking for pink buds
to prune back, the *mohel* tends
his flower garden.



Look, Muffy! I've found
the most splendid tchotchke for
our Hanukkah bush.

Scrabble® anarchy
after *putzhead* is placed on
a triple-word score.





The curved greenish twig
is a snake! Time to go back
to our hotel room.

BLT on toast—
the rabbi takes his first bite,
then the lightning bolt.



Jewish and slightly
dyslexic—I thought I was

buying a *Chai* Pet.

Jewish voodoo tip—
mention an acting career,
then watch for chest pain.



The frost-withered fields
flecked with white chrysanthemums—
Bubbeleh, your scarf.

Shatner and Nimoy
observing Shabbos—"Scotty,
beam up a minyan."



Our youngest daughter,
our most precious jewel. Hence,
the name Tiffany.

Lightbulb out again—
how many of us must meet
to change it this time?





Seven-foot Jews in
the NBA slam-dunking—
my alarm clock rings.

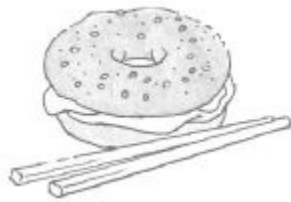
“Love the stranger, for
you were strangers in Egypt.”
Can’t we be just friends?



The sparkling blue sea
beckons me to wait one hour

after my sandwich.

Visitors sweat on
plastic-covered sofas saved
for whom? Kissinger?



The wily red fox—
at temple, I spy its paws
lurking in a stole.

Shedding its wet skin,
the spritzing seltzer bubble
becomes a Buddha.



Proof Columbus was
Jewish—kept telling the crew
no running on deck.

Premature pleasure—
savoring the chopped liver
ahead of the guests.





Middle East peace talks—
the parties reach agreement.
Falafel for lunch.

Shaking a raised fist—
“May a plague enter his gums!”
says the nice old man.



Hava nagila,
hava nagila, hava—

enough already.

Testing the warm milk
on her wrist, she beams—nice, but
her son is forty.



A lovely nose ring—
excuse me while I put my
head in the oven.

Monarch butterfly,
I know your name used to be
Caterpillarstein.



Hidden connection—
starvation in Africa,
food left on my plate.

My nature journal—
today, saw some trees and birds.
I should know the names?





SJF seeking
eternal soul mate—must be
a professional.

Like a bonsai tree,
your terrible posture at
my dinner table.



Congratulations
on being first in your class

at Stanley Kaplan.

Tea ceremony—
steam, incense, lacquered bamboo.
Try the cheese danish.



Odd new disorder—
the Jew who mistook his wife
for a yarmulke.

Monet? Van Gogh? Feh.
Pissarro—a mensch! Did you
know he was Jewish?



After the warm rain,
the sweet scent of camellias.
Did you wipe your feet?

The spitting image
of her father. Down the road
rhinoplasty, yes?





After the youngest
recites the Four Questions, the
fifth—when do we eat?

Such nakhes! Our son,
the hitchhiker, has been named
head of a new cult.



Jews on safari—
map, compass, elephant gun,

hard sucking candies.

Would-be convert lost—
thawed Lender's Bagels made a
bad first impression.



Wet moss on the old
stone path—flat on my back, I
ponder whom to sue.

Filled with guilt about
fly-fishing—offspring of an
interfaith marriage.



The long pilgrimage
to the venerable shrine—
Leonard's of Great Neck.

Too much Seder wine—
I dream of pyramids built
with cubes of sugar.





Quietly murmured
at Saturday services,
Yanks 5, Red Sox 3.

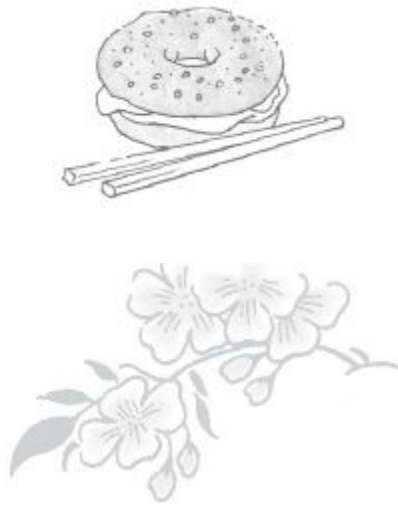
No egg and no cream,
just syrup, seltzer, and milk—
Zen of the egg cream.



Coroner's report—
“The deceased, wearing no hat,

caught his death of cold.”

Today I am a
man. Tomorrow I return
to the seventh grade.



The sparrow brings home
too many worms for her young.
“Force yourself,” she chirps.

Harry Houdini—
amazing escape from his
real name, Erich Weiss.



Today, mild shvitzing.
Tomorrow, so hot you'll *plotz*.
Five-day forecast—*feh*.

Jewish nudist camp,
surgical scars compared—who
did your gall bladder?





The pure white lotus—
how rare to glimpse it parked in
my neighbor's driveway.

“Can’t you just leave it?”
the new Jewish mother asks—
umbilical cord.



Cherry blossoms bloom.
Sure, it's beautiful, but is

it good for the Jews?

Left the door open
for the Prophet Elijah.
Now our cat is gone.



“Is this bug kosher?”
Davening praying mantis
asks before dining.

The shivah visit—
so sorry for your loss. Now
back to my problems.



Constipation gas
fiber enema—chatting
with the *mishpocheh*.

Now that Koreans
are “the New Jews,” the old Jews
can leave for Boca.





Swollen by spring rain,
flowing into inky pools,
the varicose vein.

Yom Kippur—forgive
me, God, for the Mercedes
and all the lobsters.



Jewish Buddhist gripe—
“Threw out my back davening

in the full lotus.”

Mom, please! There is no
need to put that dinner roll
in your pocketbook.



Hard to tell under
the lights—white yarmulke or
male-pattern baldness?

Lonely mantra of
the Buddhist monk—“They never
call, they never write.”



One of us must be
the designated drinker—
Jewish carousing.

Bare autumn branches,
the old crow sits. Mother, come
down from there at once.





How can I atone
for scalping my tickets to
the High Holidays?

Jewish summer camp—
the tall pines cleared of wildlife
by a sing-along.



Buying sliced nova,
I feel a whole smoked whitefish
giving me a look.

The Jewish New Year—
in Times Square, no ball is dropped.
Where is everyone?



Heimlich. Is that a
Jewish name? I wonder, as
a diner turns blue.

Concert of car horns
as we debate the question
of when to change lanes.



Parents in mourning—
how can our own daughter be
dating a drummer?

A haiku poet?
Go ahead. You can always
fall back on teaching.





Denmark's Jewish prince—
“To be or not to be—Oy!
Have I got tsuris.”

Through the Red Sea costs
extra.” Israeli movers
overcharge Moses.



“Baby needs a new
mink coat!” Compulsive gambler,
all-night dreidel game.

Manhattan sidewalk—
a Hindu street vendor sells
potato knishes.



Is one Nobel Prize
so much to ask from a child
after all I’ve done?

Sorry I’m not home
to take your call. At the tone
please state your bad news.



About the Author

DAVID M. BADER is a writer living in New York City, a pursuit that raises the eternal question, “From this he makes a living?” He is not even distantly related to Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, though he insists on referring to her as “Aunt Ruth.”



Also by David M. Bader

How to Be an Extremely Reform Jew



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